

*Instructors need special skills and sensitivities to be competent in distance education.*

## **Chapter 2**

### **Competence in Teaching at a Distance**

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“Just go in there and teach the way you have always taught. There isn’t any difference between traditional classroom teaching and teaching at a distance.” This often-repeated statement by poorly informed administrators perpetuates the myth that no additional training is necessary to go from the classroom to the studio. This is exactly what some administrators want to hear. They reason that if there are only minor differences, then instructors don’t need additional training, and this keeps the budgets down. This reasoning leads to telecourses that simply shift the same demagoguery currently prominent in traditional college classrooms, the passive lecture, to teleclassrooms. The “talking head” predominates.

Institutions that perpetuate this attitude and do not provide training for distance learning instructors will not survive in the growing student consumer market. Those telecourses that have been designed or modified for mediated communication in real and delayed time and whose instructors have been trained to take advantage of the visual and interactive nature of the growing variety of delivery systems will be the choice of potential students.

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out some of the skills and strategies that will help instructors make a difference in teaching at a distance. Instructors who are able to put these ideas into practice will be designing courses that will both appeal to and teach the distance students more effectively.

#### **Competencies for Distance Teaching**

There are a number of areas of competence that relate to teaching at a distance, especially on interactive television, both live and taped. These competencies have been reported in four separate studies that used surveys and interviews with a variety of populations and situations. Three studies (Cyr and Smith, 1988, 1990; Thach, 1994) have dealt with distance learning in academic institutions, and one (Chute, Balthazan, and Posten, 1988) has dealt with training in a corporate setting. All four studies identified many of the same general areas of competence, with a few exceptions. These general areas of competence in the individual studies are grouped below with the study or studies citing that area as important.

The areas of competence identified by all four studies (Cyr and Smith, 1988, 1990; Chute, Balthazan, and Posten, 1988; Thach, 1994) are discussed below.

*Course planning and organization.* This area includes a knowledge of how telegraphing differs from traditional teaching and how the capabilities, advantages, and disadvantages of the delivery system affect the course plan. It also includes logistical knowledge such as copyright issues, the use of site coordinators, and technical details such as moving instructional materials (tests, homework, handouts, and so on) back and forth between sites. This area encompasses more basic course design strategies such as how to build interactive teaching/learning strategies into the course, how to use technologies effectively, and general knowledge of instructional development and systems theory. It also includes knowledge about learning theory and how it can be used to design more effective teaching for distance learning.

*Verbal and nonverbal presentation skills.* It is important for all teachers to be able to construct an organized presentation, to project enthusiasm for the topic, and to be able to pace a lecture appropriately. However, in addition, the teleinstructor must be able to coordinate any presentation with the study guide or handout being used by the off-site learners. This type of presentation uses keywords and phrases as fill-ins to cue students, focus their attention, and keep everyone together. An added difficulty for the distance instructor is that he or she is operating under a severe reduction in feedback cues from the learners about pacing and understanding. Additionally, the teleinstructor must be aware of how he or she looks, sounds, and moves on television. Some instructor characteristics are exaggerated, while others are diminished by the medium. Finally, because there is a premium on student interaction, the teleinstructor needs to know how to manage discussion among field sites as well as with the students at the origination site.

*Collaborative teamwork.* It will be noted in later chapters that distance teaching is more of a team effort than classroom instruction is. It is also the case that distance students need to depend on one another for a lot of their learning. Therefore, the teleinstructor needs to know how to work as part of a team and to help students work as parts of teams as well.

*Questioning strategies.* As noted above, interaction is an important part of distance teaching. Teleteachers need to know how to construct questions at a variety of intellectual levels and for a variety of instructional purposes and to move among these levels and purposes during a questioning interlude. He or she should know how to establish ground rules for asking and answering questions and how to signal which individuals and sites should respond. He or she should also know how to encourage students to ask questions and how to provide positive feedback verbally and nonverbally when they do.

*Subject matter expertise.* While it almost goes without saying that the teleinstructor needs to have a solid mastery of the subject matter, he or she should also understand how that subject matter will be learned by the students and what examples, analogies, visuals, and other supports will support that learning.

*Involving students and coordinating their activities at field sites.* This may be one of the key differences between teleteaching and classroom instruction because in addition to keeping students involved, the teleinstructor is doing it while trying to coordinate the activities of several remote sites. This means designing courses that maximize student involvement at the field sites

from 30 percent to 50 percent of class time and managing students in times activities and exercises without actually being present. To do this the instructor will need to understand how to select, design, or adapt exercises to match the domain, intellectual skill level, and cognitive level of the course objectives, while still making them clear enough to allow students at remote sites to engage in them without much direct supervision.

The following additional areas were identified by only one study.

*Basic learning theory* (Chute, Balthazan, and Posten, 1988). Knowledge of a variety of learning theories will help instructors adapt to differences in learners as well as to differences in context.

*Knowledge of the distance learning field* (Thach, 1994). This might be considered a given. However, lack of knowledge of the variety of delivery systems and their ability to provide synchronous and asynchronous communications will limit the breadth of teaching possibilities.

*Design of study guides correlated with the television screen* (Cyrs and Smith, 1988, 1990). Study guides enhance the instructor's delivery and provide an outline of the presentation by limiting the amount of note-copying and providing a conceptual outline for the student. Several study guide formats exist that can be used as learning management tools before, during, and after a teleclass. All parts of the study guide are correlated with pictures and graphics that appear on the television screen or with a presentation using either audio or computer conferencing.

*Graphic design and visual thinking* (Cyrs and Smith, 1988, 1990). Television is a visual medium in any format, and instructors need to be taught to visualize their ideas. Instructors should be able to communicate ideas as pictures, graphics, and artifacts, alone and complemented by key words and phrases. Visual thinking can also be represented with word pictures. Instructors may also need to redesign graphic and pictorial materials from any source, including textbooks, to meet the requirements of an aspect ratio appropriate to television or computer monitor. They should have a knowledge of basic graphic design principles for television and computing and an understanding of visual communication principles and techniques.

## **Conclusion**

Anyone who says that teaching at a distance is the same as traditional teaching is dead wrong. Instructors need more planning time, more instructional support, and additional training to modify courses for all of the potential delivery formats for distance teaching. Institutions planning on making incursions into the distance education area should be considering the capabilities of the faculty along with the capabilities of the technology and providing for both.

## References

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